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ABSTRACT

Decision making should be viewed as a deliberate process that can be taught as a basic classroom skill. Common myths and problems surrounding decision making are discussed. The purpose of initiating decision making opportunities is to promote creativity, not conformity. Five suggested steps for the process are: (1) explore the many alternatives available to resolve the issue/problem; (2) evaluate the plausibility of each solution; (3) make the decision/choice; (4) defend (justify) the decision/selection/resolution; (5) act and review. Students should practice the decision making process in the classroom to develop skills. Weighing the risks is also discussed. (PPB)

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DECISION MAKING: AN OVERLOOKED BASIC SKILL

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DECISION MAKING
AN OVERLOOKED BASIC SKILL

It is possible (not probable, but possible) to spend an entire day without reading a word. It is not possible, however, to spend an entire day (assuming mental competence) without making many decisions.

1. *Do you agree with the above statement?*

2. *What is the relationship (if any) to public education?*

3. *Is this an area that should be considered important by the teacher?*

4. *What opportunities are your students provided to exercise decision making skills in your classroom?*

Assuming an individual accepts the premise that decision making is a basic skill, then this is one of the most neglected areas in school's curriculum. How many times are you as an educator confronted with the question, *"what should I do?"* Or, how many times have you asked yourself, *"if only I had done it this way....things could have been different"?* A simple conclusion is that the presence of decision making as a deliberate act in the public schools is somewhat like the occurrence of an exciting dream--infrequent, unexpected and often ending too quickly.

Common Myths and Problems Surrounding Decision Making

1. People become wise decision makers when reaching the voting age.

2. Our nation's schools only have time to teach the basics.

3. Children have to be told what to do until they are in junior high school.

4. The classroom is no place to teach decisions or values to children

5. Developmental considerations prevent decision making from being taught to elementary children.

6. Decision making belongs in the home, not in our schools.

7. Decision making and problem solving are the same things.

Ted Kaltsounis states that there are two types of decisions: those where knowledge is enough and those for which it is not enough. The second type, of course, are the ones where values play a critically important role and are many times controversial. However, the threat of controversy does not justify ignoring the importance of the development of a skill--especially one needed for life. How, then, do teachers begin?

Getting Started

One of the important first steps for the classroom teacher is to provide safe decision making opportunities for the children, recognizing that the process is the ultimate goal. Beginning in the primary grades, opportunities like the following are encouraged.

*As a precautionary note--students are accustomed to a correct/incorrect response format. (Barth, Rowe and others report 90% of all classroom questions asked solicit specific feedback.) Therefore, these first exercises may not yield the creativity or variety that the classroom teacher would like.

1. Tell the children that you have a problem requiring their assistance. At this point in the progression, simple problems such as:

   --"I have a dog that will not stay in my yard. What can I do?"

   --"I am carrying two heavy bags of groceries and my nose itches. What can I do?"

   --"One of my mother's friends gives me a piece of her special candy and it tastes terrible. What can I do?

Again, exercises like the ones listed above are safe and fun. Also, they allow the children to get used to thinking beyond the practical and obvious. Therefore, an appropriate label for activities such as these as mental 'stretching' exercises. It should be noted that many of these responses will not be feasible. However, the purpose is to promote creativity--not conformity or total practicality. The formal steps of the decision making process are as follows.

Decision Making Process
(once the problem/issue has been identified)

1. **Explore the many alternatives available to resolve the issue/problem.**

   (during early exercises, it is a good idea to ask for a prescribed number of solutions to assure achieving the goal of mental 'stretching')

2. **Evaluate the plausibility of each solution.**

   (should be executed verbally with simple exercises or explored in depth with the more complex issues)

3. **Make the decision/choice.**

   (including the reasons why certain alternatives were not selected)

4. **Defend (justify) the decision/selection/resolution.**

   (reasons to support the choice are critical during the modeling phase)

5. **Act and review (as appropriate to situation).**

(there are certain situations that are better explored from a vicarious standpoint--i.e. the value of wearing seat belts in an accident situation)

While the previous model is rather simplistic, it can prove to be practical and useful to reinforce the feeling-thinking-acting sequence as well as the fact that behavior is caused.

The Decision Making Progression

If children are to become efficient decision makers, then the opportunity to develop this skill must take place and be modeled in the classroom. One of the first things teachers can do to involve the students in a decision making process is to have them involved in establishing classroom rules. In most cases, the children will be much stricter than the classroom teacher. Therefore, it is important for the teacher to generalize, modify, and support the input from the students. Then, he/she should post the rules and discuss them with the child/children when they are broken. Not unlike many classroom management theories, this one promotes responsibility for one's actions.

An excellent way to establish the need for classroom rules and regulations is to design a game with no rules. The children will quickly become frustrated and complain. The teachable moment has arrived and it is time to act. It may be helpful to compare the classroom to the family and the rules experienced there. The major point being accomplished is ownership of behavior and similarities of both environments (transfer and application). Rules outlining the freedom to go to the restroom based on individual need rather than a prescribed time are also appropriate during this phase. It should be noted that decision making has not been named or the process discussed directly. Identifying the specific process components should start in the next phase and then should be referred to frequently.

The purpose of this stage in the decision making progression is to model, model, and then model some more. Children do not simply arrive at a point of proficiency without the modeling factor playing a significant role. Simple 'stretching' exercises like the ones mentioned earlier will prove to be invaluable. Later, the teacher should move to simple situations which involve group decision making skills.

Group decision making should continue with more complex issues. Specifically, issues that require research and the collection of additional information are appropriate. Many decisions in life require a considerable amount of time, consideration, and effort, and children should be aware of that (i.e. job changes, moving, purchase of new products). An example of an activity intermediate aged children enjoy is when the teacher has them to assist in the decision of an automobile to purchase. The teacher has the children gather information on a variety of cars of interest (**considering the many alternatives**). Secondly, the children compare the cars from the basis of cost, colors, features, expenses, etc. (**evaluating the alternatives**). The teacher then considers the choice recommended by the children (**making the decision**) and then defends the choice made (**justifying the decision**) by listing the many factors involved. Whether or not the fifth step of the process is incorporated depends on the finances of the teacher. Still, one could verbalize the additional step (**act and review**) without the actual purchase.

Additional group decision activities relating to social studies to be used beyond this point could be:

1. Where a person might choose to live.
2. How to decide whom to vote for during an election year.
3. How to solve a problem involving conflict.
4. Whether or not history would have been changed had a major decision been different.
5. Analyzing the issues and factors relating to important decisions made.

The purpose of this stage is to demonstrate the importance of being an educated and informed decision maker. A teacher should use his/her own classroom and situation to add to the previous list of suggestions.

The final stage of the decision making progression focuses more on the individual and the risks involved in decision making. With the emphasis being placed on process writing and writing in journals, the teacher has more opportunities than ever to allow the students to address issues such as those that follow without ridicule and possible peer condemnation. Professional discretion should be used in determining which of these should be used by the individual. Also, because of the nature of these topics, group decision making could be used to provide the students with the framework to be applied when working alone. By emphasizing the risks involved, students will develop a better understanding of the consequences of behavior. The teacher can choose to use one or more of these situations.

*Weighing the Risks**

	Situation to consider	*Risks involved*
1.	Whether to cheat on a test.	_____
2.	Whether to let the air out of someone's bicycle tires.	_____
3.	Whether to tell a person you like them.	_____
4.	Whether to play sick and miss school.	_____
5.	Whether to buy designer clothes.	_____
6.	Whether to tell a lie for a friend.	_____

Complete the Following Sentences

1. A time I made a good decision was when_____
2. A time I made a bad decision was when_____
3. A time when I could not make a decision was when_____
4. A time when I made a decision too late was when_____
5. A decision I made to please my friends but made me unhappy was_____
6. A decision I made that didn't please my friends was when_____
7. A decision I made that hurt someone was when_____
8. A decision I made that helped someone was when_____
9. A decision I made that pleased my parents was when_____
10. A decision I made that disappointed my parents was when_____
11. I make the best decisions when I_____
12. I make the worst decisions when I_____

*Taken from, The Other Side of the Report Card, by Larry Chase.

In conclusion, classroom decision making should be viewed by the teacher as the promotion of a basic skill. The previous represents a series of ideas and activities designed to promote these efforts. Regardless whether or not you decide to use one or all of these suggestions, or to utilize better ones of your own, is immaterial. The important part is that you establish an environment where decisions are allowed and where children feel the freedom to think, challenge (appropriately), succeed and fail. I may be able to experience a day when I don't read, add, write or spell, but I won't be able to experience a day without decisions. So, which skill is the most basic of all?

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